FRANKLIN & MARSHALL
COMMENCEMENT
MAY 12, 2002

I am deeply grateful today — to President Kneedler and to the Board of Trustees for this honor, which I will cherish always. And I am grateful to the faculty, parents, guests, and you — the whole reason we are here, the graduating class of 2002 — for the privilege of speaking for a few moments on this important occasion.

And what I'd like to do is say a word or two about gratitude and about love.

When I arrived here in the fall of 1955, I was scared to death but also exhilarated. I loved everything about this place, except for the fact that all 1,200 students were male. For some reason, I hadn't thought much about that. And the process of resolving that dilemma consumed an enormous amount of energy and creativity over the next four years which might more profitably been invested in study and would have made me a far better student. On the other hand, that energy and creativity did yield a life partner for whom I am deeply grateful — and who shares at the very least, fifty percent of the honor given to me today.

I loved this place. I have been proud of it ever since. I loved the fact that a son, Andrew, decided to come here and loved it too, and played football on a conference championship team, and graduated in 1988 — and would be here today except for the fact that he and Mary are waiting for a baby to arrive at any moment — and who very well could be a member of the class of 2023. And I am ever grateful for professors and coaches and advisors and friends — who loom larger, over time, as the "life givers."

This is a good day for President Kneedler. I want to express gratitude to you, Mr. President, on behalf of all of us who love and are proud of F&M, for your strong and creative and faithful leadership.

There was a wonderful Doonesbury cartoon a while ago. It's graduation day. Three graduates, in a sea of black robes, are looking bored, staring blankly ahead. One is reading a Vogue magazine. Another is plugged into his Walkman. The third looks up to the podium and asks, "Who's the old guy?" His friend responds, "I think that's the President." The questioner asks, "Of what?"

So, all of us up here, keep this in perspective. We do it because we — on this side of the platform, and the faculty and families who have come to be here today, know that this is really important, the result of real investment.

Parents love graduation. They are proud and happy. And some of them are thinking right now, “Tomorrow we’re going to be rich!”

I’m thinking a lot about my parents today. It is, of course, Mother’s Day — and if you haven’t taken care of that little bit of business in the rush and excitement of your graduation, I advise you to get it done somehow; if not a gift or flowers, at least a card. In fact, better than any of that, a note — a thank you note. I’m thinking about my parents today and how proud they would be. To them this place was a dream, a symbol of a world they knew about but was always out of reach. Their highest hope for their sons was that we would get an education.

They wanted me to know about a whole world of ideas, and literature, art, politics, and language. They wanted me to live in a bigger world than they did and to live my life fully and my coming to Franklin and Marshall was a big deal to them and my graduating four years later was an even bigger deal and I know now that I never thanked them enough. So I need to say thank you today, even though they both are gone. And you need to say it, too. Your parents’ hearts are full of pride and love. This is a big deal for them. So say it: say “thank you.” You might even throw in an “I love you” — most of us don’t say that enough either.

Gratitude is first and the second word is love: love not as a romantic feeling, but as a matter of will and determination and heart: love not as an emotion, but a disciplined intent to live for something other than your own gratification: love that calls your best out of you: love that gives rather than receives: love that gives life itself: love that is at the heart of the great religions of the world.

This is a peculiar moment for religion. Believe me, those of us who work for and are identified with religious institutions cringe every time we pick up a newspaper.

A few days after September 11, someone scribbled this chilling message on a wall in Washington D.C. —

> “Dear God, save us from the people who believe in you.”

We have more than enough religion that is absolutely certain of its truth, its exclusive truth claims — untouched by critical thinking — the kind of thinking that is the great gift of a place like this. We have too much religion that divides and separates, and inspires self-righteous intolerance, and exclusion, and ultimately violence.

What the world needs is the opposite of that: a spirit of openness and acceptance, a renewed spirit of kindness and compassion. That’s real religion, eloquently described by the ancient Hebrew prophet Michah:

> “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” [Micah 6:8]

What the world desperately needs this morning is a new generation of young men and women determined to do better, to get it right, to value the precious gift of life, their own — and the lives of every man, woman, and child with whom we must share this nation, this suddenly much smaller and much more dangerous world — value life by giving to the human family, to the life of the world. And the name of this project is “love.”

My modest proposal to you, to all of us, but particularly to you whose adult lives now lie stretched out before you for more than half a century: my modest proposal is that finding something you love enough to give your life to is the single highest priority of all. Finding some cause, some institution, some purpose that is big enough, high enough, and holy enough to require your passionate commitment —some improbable and wonderful dream like the peace of the world, the reconciliation of all God’s people, the healing and feeding and housing of all God’s children — finding something you love enough to live for, to strive for, to weep for, and if necessary — die for — is the most important life task for all of us.

In the fourth century, a Bishop of the early Christian church by the name of Augustine said something that I have found to be hauntingly true. He said:

> “O God, Thou hast made our hearts restless, until they find their rest in thee.”

He was right, I believe. You and I are created restless, sent on a lifelong journey in search of God if you will, or is you prefer — meaning, purpose, passion — something to love enough to live for and to die for.

God bless you on your way.